

Studies in Music: 3
Music and Symbolism

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IT NEEDS TO BE POINTED OUT that the moment the discussion is about the art stage of any kind of manifestation, the confrontation is with a highly processed reality. This by itself removes entire clusters of symbol from the range of discussion. To discuss music is to move away from sound as such and from sound symbols related to it.

In spite of the conceptual priority of articulated sound over its written representation the former is hardly ever analyzed in terms of musicality. Even seed-symbols such as aum have been ignored. It seems valid to generalize that oral symbols have been paid attention to, aural symbols have been ignored, while auditory symbols have hardly been recognized!

Further, discussion of musical symbolism is nearly confined to art music and an added limitation has been to restrict the consideration to the feeling aspect. Where the intellectual symbols have received some attention, the non-musical fields of perception have been active. In other words it becomes apparent that the total musical reality is in need of being of *comprehensively* discussed to determine the symbolological functions in a wider perspective. Primarily the position denies us a blanket theoretical statement about the relationship that subsists between music and symbolism. It becomes essential here to examine the four musical categories—primitive, folk, popular and art. As each of these operates on a different symbolistic level the problems posed too are different. Both music and symbolism are terms that need to be further broken up as a precondition to any attempt to formulate frameworks so necessary to discussions in aesthetics, cultural musicology and such other disciplines.

Symbolism and the Performing Arts: Symbolism operates through symbolic objects, processes and procedures. Two of the etymological connections of the word symbolism bring out two of its chief characteristics. In Greek the related noun and verb respectively mean 'mark' and 'to put together'. This in itself is sufficient to inspire a somewhat rhetorical question: what is all art but a marking off and

a putting together? However, less highly wrought statements on the pervasive importance of symbolism have been axiomatic since long. Art, language, science, religion, history and other specifically human achievements are all stated to be symbolic in their very essence. In other words the importance of carrying on the discussion of the relationship is a safe assumption.

As a first step in the discussion it is to be noted that music is one member of the family of performing arts with dance and drama as other cognate entities. It is therefore deducible that symbolism, as it appears in these arts, displays some uncommon features because of the special characteristics of the performing as contrasted with other art families. Against this background some questions may be put down for future consideration: From the triumvirate, which art tends to be more symbolic? Why and to what consequences? What are the functions carried out by symbolism in the performing arts? Is the final significance of the performing arts dependent on symbolism? In what measure?

Each of the performing arts merits an independent discussion in view of its separate identity and contribution. However, taking the three as a class, some general remarks are possible.

1. Dance, drama and music enjoy two levels of symbolistic activity—linguistic and non-linguistic.

2. In these arts symbolistic activity takes place on the two levels alternatively. It is an aesthetic rarity to have symbolistic operations simultaneously on both the levels or planes. This is not to suggest that the two symbolizations are mutually exclusive. However employment of symbolism on a single plane at a time merely indicates an optimum utilization of expressive resources that converge on the human perceptual faculties.

3. Non-linguistic symbolism as such works either through the audio or video mode of perception. As argued later, separation of these channels plays an important role in the overall functioning of symbols.

4. As the total experiential content ascribable to the performing arts is further categorized into primitive, folk, popular and art, the symbolological examination needs to refer to all the categories.

5. In addition to the experiential content the fundamental performing dimensions, space and time, are relevant. Every performance is an instance of a dominant temporality or spatiality and the fact influences the related symbolization.

6. Symbols too are further sub-grouped into personal, cultural and human symbols. This classification emerges as a result of the

criterion of identifying the source of symbolic potency. It should however be obvious that other classifications too prove legitimate and useful depending on the depth and angle of the analysis involved. For example emergent/associational and natural/artificial are other possible classifications. Another important sub-grouping involves expressive/communicational symbols.

7. A feature common to the performing arts is their inherent dependence on audience contribution. On the other hand symbols and their operations can exist independent of audience contribution. To that extent symbolistic operations enjoy a degree of self-sufficiency.

This septet of general remarks along with the questions raised earlier prepare the background against which a symbolological examination of music is to take place.

Performance: The Prime Mover: One of the questions raised earlier could be partially answered at this point. It was asked whether performing arts differ symbolistically because they are performing arts. The answer is in the affirmative and a partial reason is that performance is the prime mover in these arts. Performance as a controlling factor consists of a core and its peripherals. It is logical that the core gets priority in the proposed symbolological examination. On this account the pre- and post-performance phases are sidelined. It is the continuous present of performance that should engage our critical attention. The Indian ethos accentuates the oral tradition with the result that composing music or practising it also partakes of the characteristics of performance. Thus understood, music and performance become inevitable partners in musical ventures.

To come to grips with the problems posed by performance it is essential to devote exclusive attention to the oral-aural aspect of music. Therefore notation, gestures, movements and such other visual and kinesthetic phenomena are to be kept out of symbolological consideration. Notation being entirely a visual symbolization of music can be put away less guiltily. But that is not the case with gestures, etc. They are inherently connected with the act of performance and their exclusion is less pardonable. It can only be pleaded that their peripherality alone relegates them to the background and that their symbolistic contributions are not thereby denied.

Symbolization and Musicing: Various are the explanations offered for the human urge to symbolize. The most significant explanation traces the urge to the essentially human endeavour to represent

rather than to present. Concepts, relationships and ideational processes as distinct from objects, events and factualities are found to be basically human concerns and these concerns emerge as symbols while seeking an outlet. To become manifest in this manner means that the symbolizing urge gets a suitable medium. A symbolistically suitable medium possesses four qualities. It is reproducible, divisible, capable of repeated rearrangements and devoid of fixed, innate dictionary-meaning. Sound as an element possesses these qualities in abundance and consequently symbolistic activity has relied on it very heavily. Musicing as a predominantly audio, non-linguistic, temporal and acoustic activity is to be examined for its symbolistic achievements against this background while keeping in mind the four-fold categorization.

What are the clues to help determine symbolistic operations in music? It must be admitted that no firm general position could possibly be stated for want of adequate cross-cultural evidence. The well-known musical plurality of India poses additional problems. However the available ethnological data and musicological positions do help in laying down broad guidelines to identify symbolistic operations in music.

1. Musico-symbolistic activity takes place on three levels—musicological, musico-societal, musico-psychological. With the usual overlaps and variable operational intensities the triad covers the totality of music.

A very important symbolization on the musicological level occurs because musical cultures equate given performing practices with definite degrees of excellence. For example, the ability to reach very high notes or very low notes, to perform at great speed, to weave intricate rhythmic patterns, to produce uncommon vocal effects, to synchronize one's own performing moves with unfamiliar musical moulds, to compose or perform with certain numerical formulae, etc., are taken to stand for certain positive musical qualities. Such equations are not sign-situations because there is no intrinsic causal connection between these skills and the values placed on them. It is also to be remembered that it cannot be assumed that the equations have a universal or cross-cultural validity.

As for musico-societal symbolization, the operations are displayed through the accepted equivalences between musical objects, practices, processes etc. and the non-musical aspects of the material life of the society. For example the drumbeat 'languages', the associations accepted between certain instruments and events, or between certain timbres and occasions, etc., fall into this category. Once again

the clear absence of causal relationships and the uncertainty of cross-cultural existence need to be marked.

Musico-psychological symbolistic activity exhibits a firm acceptance of the relationship existing between musical features and the psychological states of performers as well as receivers. The psychological states thus linked to music are not definite, identifiable emotions but rather diffuse and inclusive mental states. For example plato's characterization of modes as valorous, sensuous, etc., or the Indian position about the *rasa-raga* relationship belong to the third level of musico-symbolistic activity.

2. Apart from operating on three levels musical symbolism also manifests itself through physical objects, procedures and processes. The manifestations vary in symbolistic intensity and range of affect.

3. Three kinds of relationship characterize the existence and operations of musical symbolism expressed through objects, procedures and processes. Preference or insistence, taboo, and association through coexistence over a long period are the three types.

4. It is true that musical symbolism cannot be deduced from musicological analysis. However aesthetic preferences as distinguished from grammatical sanctions provide an unfailing indication of an existing musical symbolism. This is because aesthetic preferences (which are more culture-oriented than is usually granted) are points of maximum vibrations of a societal mind. Aesthetic preferences are the soundings that reveal deeper currents of the psychic energy of the collective mind in search of value-supports to hold the entire panoply of human culture. It is symptomatic that traditional aesthetic norms or criteria hardly ever refer to 'beauty'; they refer to psychological states that lie beyond experiences related to sensation. Aesthetic criteria allude to transcendental functions and music is slated to symbolize them under certain conditions.

These four cues are to be applied to examine the four musical categories in order to understand and assess the role of musical symbolism.

PRIMITIVE MUSIC AND SYMBOLISM

I have argued elsewhere in favour of making a distinction between the two terms 'primitive' and 'tribal'. Further I have suggested that the former terms be restricted to refer to musico aesthetic criteria and the latter to other ethnological requirements. The specificity of usage leads to a clearer conceptual mapping which in turn makes it possible to detect primitive musical features in the music of

non-tribals. Primitivity, treated as a quality, cuts across the extra-musical ethnological categorization of human societies. The possible omnipresence of musical qualities such as the primitive underlines the tenuous connections music has with socio-economic and other classifications of human groups. Unfortunately very little attention has been given to the presence of primitive musical elements in non-tribal societies and hence discussion of primitive music leans heavily on ethnographic studies of tribal life. However this is to be accepted merely as a matter of strategic convenience. No conceptual contradiction is involved in extending the scope of the discussion of primitivity and falling back on descriptions of tribal life and behaviour.

Tribal life is permeated with symbolism and music is no exception. Four types of musical symbols are easily detected—sexual, instrumental, rhythmic, tonal. It is not surprising that almost all the symbolic clues discussed earlier come into operation here. Some comments on the quality of symbolism in primitive music are in order:

1. Linguistic and literary orientations have a minor role to play in primitive music. In fact preference for the non-linguistic and the non-literary is so great that even when pitched at an expressive level, the linguistic and the literary moments are deliberately dimmed by employing other musical elements in a particular way. The reason is that sound *per se* is regarded as important and care is taken to keep it to the fore. To that extent linguistic-literary symbolism fails to assume significance.

2. Compared to the other musical elements, rhythm and timbre are prominent in their symbolic use.

3. From the variety of available timbres the scraped, struck sounds in particular and percussion as a mode of producing sound are preferred to concretize the symbolism.

4. Primitivity of music makes it appear uninterrupted and indivisible. A certain formlessness is perceived because there are no firm beginnings or terminations though the individual musical units are precisely performed. In other words the final messages are of eternity and circularity. A straight line and a circle would easily come to mind as the corresponding visual symbols.

5. What does the primitive in music symbolize at the musico-psychological level? It stands for an undifferentiated state of mind that initiates a process to regain the poise it has lost. The loss of poise in itself indicates disturbances in human relationship with the external world inclusive of natural forces. Therefore occasions of joy

or sorrow as well as those of natural or supernatural benevolence or hostility inspire symbolistic musical evocation.

FOLK MUSIC AND SYMBOLISM

It is important to remember that the folk element in the performing arts partakes of qualities of primitive expression as well as art. In fact this is the feature that constitutes the primary cause of its wider appeal. A related characteristic is the greater role assumed by language and literature in folk manifestations. It is deducible that regional character comes into play very strongly. However, examined symbolologically, the regional and the linguistic-literary factors impose certain limitations. As a result a more stratified symbolism appears on the scene. Folk musical symbolism is chiefly Melodic, rhythmic-pattern-oriented, instrumentation-oriented, prosodic, socio-structural. What does a qualitative analysis of the symbolism indicate?

1. Folk musical symbolism is more deliberately employed. Well-defined norms and well-established social customs developed and preserved by a particular cultural group shape it cumulatively. Compared to it, primitive musical symbolism is more spontaneous. Folk musical symbolism bears unmistakable marks of deliberate construction and persistent cultivation. It follows logically that it is also prone to easier and wider changes in contrast to primitive musical symbolism distinguished by constancy.

2. Musical structures and their presentation exhibit a discernible aesthetic influence in folk music. To that extent folk music moves nearer to art music and its symbolism shares features with art musical symbolism discussed later. The symbolistic shift towards the aesthetic is detected in the melodic, rhythmic as well as prosodic aspects.

3. Musical symbolism of the musico-societal type operates in folk expression in a very concrete manner. The folk performing set and its distribution reflects the social structure. In this context the important question is: Who is allowed to play what and when? Equations between musical features and non-musical factors are thus established, investing the former with a capacity to represent the latter. The qualitative shift from the apparently similar primitive correspondence is to be noted even though this by itself does not mean a movement towards the art music situation.

4. Folk musical symbolism evidences the powerful role of religion

and various cults. Along with language and literature rituals make their presence felt. A variety of forces ensure that the rituals are rigorously ordered, elaborately and subtly motivated. This facet comes through very clearly when the ritual-controlling framework created by the melodic and rhythmic aspects is observed.

5. Folk musical presentations are characterized by a multiplicity of expressive forces nearly turning them into veritable packages of stimuli. Hence there is a greater need to control and coordinate them. Almost every sense stimulus is afforded scope and therefore folk musical symbolism becomes a component of a complicated total process of patterning social behaviour in which a number of symbolizing agencies take part. Perhaps it is debatable to ascribe symbolic capacities to all human senses but the multiplicity of senses participating in symbolizing is not in question. What is more problematic however is to determine whether all sense-operations are equally perceivable in simultaneous occurrences such as folk presentations. It is submitted that a firm build-up of associations between musical and non-musical symbolism makes the latter more perceivable and therefore music becomes a controlling agency as well as a symbolic agent.

6. One feature of folk musical symbolism is particular to it and is not usually associated with art musical symbolism. A fair proportion of its symbolism is likely to be intellectually conceived. The description 'intellectually conceived' in the present context means that the symbolism is deliberately introduced due to philosophical, aesthetic or social compulsion. Symbolism of this type is regarded as legitimate because its genesis involves symbols that gather more and more strength through association and because they have a wider hinterland. In fact the possibility is that the symbols might be transformed into emotive symbols with the passage of time. In case the symbols fail to undergo this transformation they continue to operate as symbols of secondary intensity.

What does the folk musical symbol stand for at the musico-psychological level? The answer would be that it symbolizes a differentiated psychological state seeking to channelize the psychic energy of the collective mind. The channelization is deemed necessary because it separates the experiential content of social groups in more controllable units. This is why folk performances can be received on dimensions normally paired as contrastive—religious-secular, individual-societal, occasional-cyclical. It is only to be expected that compared to primitive musical symbolism, that of folk expression acquires a noticeably demarcated character.

ART MUSIC AND SYMBOLISM

Art music is also known as classical music. According to established Western usage the term classical refers to identifiable sophisticated expression traced to definite periods in art history. The 19th century Indian products of English learning took to the term classical instead of the more technical Indian term *shastriya*, i.e. scientific. (This may have been a result of the pervasive craving to find and exhibit occidental-oriental correspondences in all walks of life!) Both the usages however indicate a musical reality more crystallized, clearly segmented and deliberately created than the two musics discussed earlier. Without detracting from its merits it needs to be said that art music is artificial. It exemplifies clear motivation, definite aesthetic goals, established music-making processes and a systematic dependence on well-formulated grammars. Unless the essentially 'made' character of art music is understood and appreciated identification of the musical symbolism particular to it is hardly possible.

1. It is to be admitted that a large portion of art musical symbolism is indirect. It has come to music *via* literature and literary theory. Hence it is no surprise that dictionaries of Western music do not accord the status of a full-fledged technical term to 'symbolism'. The term gets a terminological foothold merely on account of certain composers (and compositions) committed to a descriptive content in music (e.g. Debussy *via* Mallarmé). In other words art music strongly asserts the intrinsic reluctance of music to stand for something else. Music can be made to represent other entities only through the intermediary role of literature. It is in this spirit that the positions of Susan Langer and others must be appreciated. However their positions fail to distinguish between categories of music. Primitive and folk musics, as has been pointed out, stand for something outside musical expression.

2. It is the induced symbolism of art music which explains the persistent musicological attempts in India to extend the symbolic connections (of art music) to other sense-modalities. In fact the efforts move farther and encompass areas of gemmology, religion, accoutrement, etc. The well-known tradition of Ragmala paintings or of Ragadhyana prove the powerful operations of the symbolizing urge to relate music to an extensive array of perception channels. Of a similar kind is the raga-ragini differentiation.

3. Art music presents a major case of a total reliance on the oral-aural to bring the symbolizing processes into action. Symbolizing powers are forced into a narrow channel as sound shorn of

non-musical connections is concentrated upon. This process makes art music eminently non-representative. What is represented by the aural or tonal symbols is hardly discussed because of the nonrepresentational nature of art music. The same feature is however responsible for the variety and density of sound patterns as opposed to their repetitive and sparse occurrence in primitive and folk music.

4. It stands to reason that art music should prove to be extremely rich in musicological symbolism. This is a dictate of the total framework in which it functions. A symbolistic view of psychophysical processes and technical skills equates certain musical qualities and excellences with strict adherence to norms, acquisition of certain physical abilities, or acquisition of the performance repertoire in a particular manner, etc. The abundance of musicological symbolism is directly connected with the importance attached to sound patterns as sound patterns. In other words sound is significant in primitive music because it is sound while it is important in art music because it is patterned. Numerical symbolism in art music is also of musicological import. It is evident in structuring of musical scales, crystallization of musical forms, etc.

5. The eminently abstracted quality of art music inevitably makes it poorer in musico-societal symbolism. Major channels of symbolization (e.g. rituals) are restricted to pre- and post-performance phases in art music. Admittedly some gestures and movements occur during performance, but they are peripheral. The same peripherality is seen in the musico-societal symbolism realized through forehead marks, headgears, positioning and distribution of the performing set.

POPULAR MUSIC AND SYMBOLISM

1. Popular music presents a very complex phenomenon and owes its existence to motivation of an unanalyzably mixed musical and non-musical origin. Popular musical symbolism reflects the complexity.

2. By its very nature popular music draws upon all the three musical categories—primitive, folk, art. The genetic variety of its symbolism is to be traced to these multiple sources qualitatively so heterogeneous that the derived symbolism is also characterized by a certain incoherence. Popular musical symbolism invariably gives the impression of being an assemblage.

3. It has been explained that popular music is a category specially bound with contemporary times. Hence arises a peculiar feature of popular musical symbolism—it tends to gain in symbolistic power at a

period later than that of its origin. The delayed emergence of popular musical items as symbolic of a particular bygone period is one of the specific qualities logically derived from its intense contemporaneity.

4. On account of its modality and the operational agencies involved popular music throws up items of symbolistic veneer in a short time though they also become dessicated (symbolistically) in a short time as the parent music itself tends to get phased out. However, as explained earlier, the possibility of the music becoming symbolic at a later period cannot be ruled out.

5. Popular music is a category that depends at all stages on the mass media. Hence the symbolism is conditioned by the state of development of the media. In the present circumstances the symbols appear to move towards becoming audio-visual packages though the dominance is of visualizing processes.

It may perhaps be helpful to summarize the conclusions with a tabulation:

<i>Musical category</i>	<i>What it stands for</i>	<i>Mode in which symbolization is achieved</i>	<i>Means by which modes are concretized</i>
Primitive	An undifferentiated collective and individual psyche in the process of regaining a lost poise or state of equilibrium	1. Repetition 2. Unilinearity 3. Timbre deviation 4. Recognition of sound as sound 5. Application of music for (almost) therapeutic purposes	Through consistent employment of micro-units Through a predominant dependence on time divisions Through a clear indifference to sweetness as criterion. Through an omnipresent percussive effect Through (a) sex-symbolism; collective expression
Folk	A demarcated collective and individual psyche in need of channelizing the societal energy which enjoys contrastive sources—personal-societal, religious-secular,	1. Flexible repetition 2. Circularity	Through improvisation and accentuation of the solo element Through deliberate patterning of musical resources.

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	didactic entertaining, etc.	3. Melodic and rhythmic patterning 4. Establishment of a musico-societal symbolism	Through a consistent juxtaposition of basic and derived patterns of the musical material taken as a whole Through (a) distribution of performing energy between core and peripherals; (b) package form of presentation; (c) recourse to linguistic and regional particularities
Art	Highly individualized human genius moving towards solo or selfexpression (and not necessarily communication) of ideas and emotions that are abstracted	1. Improvisation 2. Accentuation of the solo role 3. Evolution of a grammar of music	Through an effective distinction between compositions and elaborations and techniques particular to them Through effecting a separation of artist, accompanist and audience—all components of the performing set Through a development of the scholastic as distinct from a performing tradition
Popular	A sophisticated mass-culture in search of outlets for urges rising in response to contemporary times	1. Evolution of varied mixes of sense-perceptions 2. Constantly changing preferences for the possible mixes 3. Import of whatever is likely to attract general attention 4. Heavy reliance on 'engulfing' procedures	Through a constant search for new effects Through an innovative use of quick-reaction gadgetry Through an alert fashion-orientation Through polished presentations of the mass media